



# Raw Sex as Limit Experience: A Foucauldian Analysis of Unsafe Anal Sex between Men

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In a world of increasing economic exploitation, rationalization, individualization, and the devaluation of former human skill sets by technology with the resulting outcomes of alienation, self-estrangement, and disenchantment, the risk (*limit*) experience offers an escape to a sensual universe of emotional intensity and self-determination. This paper examines the possible ramifications between *limit experience*, resistance, and the ethics of the Self in the context of what Baudrillard calls a *post-orgiastic society*. Using the works of Michel Foucault, our objective is to understand so-called 'extreme' sexual practices as they relate to praxes of resistance and the governance of personal conduct in creating an ethics of the Self, and by examining what is often viewed as the 'extreme sexual practice of intentional unsafe anal intercourse between men', we wish to unpack the political and ethical implications of resistance through transgressive behaviour and thus illuminate the sequence: *transgression-politics-ethics* by addressing the issue of *bareback sex* as one of many high-risk practices (including dangerous sports).

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*All this I am, and I want to be: at the same time dove, serpent, and pig.*  
Nietzsche

*No words are clear enough to express the happy disdain of the one who dances with the time that kills him for those who take refuge in the expectation of eternal beatitude. The kind of fretful saintliness – which first had to be sheltered from erotic excess – has now lost all its power: one can only*



*laugh at a sacred drunkenness allied with a horror of debauchery.*  
Bataille

*The society that abolishes every adventure makes its own abolition the only possible adventure.*  
Jordan

## INTRODUCTION

We are living at the beginning of a century in which well-established and governing rules (truths) are constantly being deconstructed. The consequent decline in the authority of the major religions in the West has weakened their traditional influence on the governance and moderation of the Self, and no other system has arisen to replace them as overall guarantors of truth (Danaher *et al.*, 2000). In a world of increasing economic exploitation, rationalization, individualization, and the devaluation of former human skill sets by technology with the resulting outcomes of alienation, self-estrangement, and disenchantment, the risk (*limit*) experience offers an escape to a sensual universe of emotional intensity and self-determination. This paper examines the possible ramifications between *limit experience*, resistance, and the ethics of the Self in the context of what Baudrillard (1993) calls a *post-organistic society*. Using the works of Michel Foucault, our objective is to understand so-called 'extreme' sexual practices as they relate to praxes of resistance and the governance of personal conduct in creating an ethics of the Self, and by examining what is often viewed as the 'extreme sexual practice of intentional unsafe anal intercourse between men', this paper wishes to unpack the political and ethical implications of resistance through transgressive behaviour and thus illuminate the sequence: *transgression-politics-ethics*.

Ethics usually refers to how people behave in relation to the moral norms, sets of rules, prohibitions, and codes of a society; however, the practice of an ethics of the Self might also describe a technique for resisting these normalizing social forces. Michel Foucault believed that there is a clear link between transgression, resistance, and the ethics of the Self. Moreover, he asserted that the Self is socially constructed through the interplay (games) of multiple forms of power, and that subjectivity is fluid and always seeking lines of escape from governing agencies (Foucault, 1998). These governing bodies are part of the 'games of truth' (*jeux de vérité*), which take the forms of science, institutional rules/ideologies, and practices of control (disciplinary power). The Self responds to these normalizing processes, not by trying to



free itself from this regulation, but rather by inventing alternative practices, which Foucault identified as *pratiques de liberté* (practices of freedom). A Foucauldian perspective suggests that freedom is a fundamental condition of ethics, hence our correlation of the *limit experience* as a practice of freedom to its function as a major component of an ethics of the Self.

## CREATING THE SELF

One of Foucault's main foci was the topic of subjectivity, or the creation of the transcendent individual. He was interested in the social history that had culminated in the view that an individual's psyche was stable (static) through time and changing situations. Throughout his work, Foucault argued that such transcendence of external circumstances was impossible, and that subjectivity should be more appropriately labelled as plural, that is, *subjectivities*. This instability in the psyche extended beyond mere differences between separate individuals into the reality that multiple subjectivities can and do exist concomitantly within one individual. Building on this, Judith Butler stated that the subjectivity of any individual at any time is nothing more than a performance (Butler, 1999). According to Foucault (1990), sex has been a major contributor in the construction of these subjectivities since the 19th century, and modern and post-modern theorists consider gender, sexuality, and sexual practices to be major determinants in one's subjectivity (Mansfield, 2000).

The deployment of sexuality has its reason for being, not in reproducing itself, but in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and in controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way (Foucault, 1990, p. 107).

The construction of sexual subjectivities relies on several techniques to make sex visible, knowledgeable, and manageable. During the Victorian Period, confession was the most important technology for sexual disclosure. The 19th century did not repress sex; sexuality was not excluded from discourse. In fact, individuals were compelled to speak out and, in consequence, were exposed to the gaze of numerous experts. Foucault (1990) argued that the 'repressive hypothesis' should be challenged because 19th century society did not inhibit sex. On the contrary, it

Put into operation entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning it. Not only did it speak of sex and compel everyone to do so; it set out to formulate the uniform truth of sex. As if it suspected sex of harbouring a



fundamental secret. As if it needed this production of truth. As if it was essential that sex be inscribed not only in an economy of pleasure but in an ordered system of knowledge (p. 69).

Confession creates the object of its inquiry: the 'sexual' entity is engendered by its own discourse thus allowing an individual to be categorized, surveyed, and normalized according to social norms and customs, which change according to historical periods. Today, the use of confession as a technology of power is still apparent – the creation of sexual subjectivities is now achieved through the institutionalized application of the confession in hospitals and clinics whenever patients encounter health care providers (Holmes and Gastaldo, 2002; Pryce, 2000). The construction of sexualities through narratives and stories arising from confession is 'crucially located at the individual capillary level as well as the institutional macro domain in this pervasive membrane of power' (Pryce, 2000, p. 41).

Due in large part to these confession techniques, a few centuries ago, homosexuals became a 'species in the gallery of monsters' (Foucault, 1990).

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a *hermaphroditism* of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species (Foucault, 1990, p. 43).

Today, however, new subspecies have emerged, and have been rendered visible at sexual health clinics. One of these subsets is known as the *barebackers*. *Bareback sex* is commonly defined as 'raw sex'; it is a term derived from the expression, 'bareback riding', that is, riding a horse without a saddle (Scarce, 1999), and is used to describe voluntary, unprotected anal intercourse. It differs from relapse, which refers to an omission, or oversight on the part of both partners. Specifically, *bareback sex* constitutes a sexual practice in which condom use is explicitly and consciously excluded from anal intercourse between anonymous male partners of unknown serological status (Shernoff, 2006). Previous research results (Holmes and Warner, 2005) inform us that the rising popularity of unsafe anal sex (*bareback sex*) among males who have sex with males (MSM) is perplexing health care providers working in sexual health clinics because, despite aggressive public health messages, certain individuals wilfully engage in unsafe anal sex. Holmes and Warner (2005) found that *barebackers* reside beyond the margins of prescribed sexual health: outside 'acceptable' social norms. They exhibit a common desire, or predilection, for semen exchange, and as a consequence, they arouse curiosity, fear, and anger because they flirt with danger, contamination, and



risk. The two following quotes from *barebackers* illustrate eloquently the desire underpinning this practice:

For me it's a sign of, not just exchange, but it's like putting two drops of water and mixing it and you get one... If the guy *cums* in, and in the heat of the moment, my unconscious says 'I love this,' and that's when it fulfils me psychologically ... Maybe because I was taught that way. I was taught, or I was told that connectedness had to occur for a relationship to continue ... If I have unprotected sex, I feel connected (M3, pp. 18, 21).

Sperm has a very powerful symbolic function ... for men who have sex with men, it is the odor of masculinity, the 'fluid' that tastes like a gift ... Sperm has a very powerful symbolic function ... for men who have sex with men, it is the odor of masculinity, the 'fluid' that tastes like a gift ... (G1, p. 3)

*Barebackers*, like many other marginalized groups, also arouse fascination and desire because of their very difference (Lupton, 1999), and although semen exchange with anonymous partners is commonly viewed as irresponsible and life-threatening, like many other extreme practices (eg, dangerous sports), it not only inspires 'fear, anxiety and repulsion, but also pleasure, excitement, exhilaration, and desire' (Le Breton, 2000; Lupton, 1995, p. 167).

To date, it is simply impossible to estimate the number of MSM engaging in unsafe anal intercourse on a regular basis, but a review of the relevant literature demonstrates clearly that the topic of *bareback sex*, which was nearly nonexistent in 2000, has grown to approximately 50 articles in 2005. According to the Centre for Disease Control (CDC, 2003), the number of gay men who reported not using condoms in combination with multiple anonymous partners rose from 24% to 45% between 1994 and 1999. A look at the statistics in other Western countries reveals that unsafe anal intercourse is not limited to North America. In a survey (Sigma Research, 2003) of more than 14,000 gay males conducted in the UK, up to 60% of respondents reported having practiced *bareback sex*, and studies in Russia and in the cities of Budapest, Melbourne, and Sydney all report increases in *barebacking* (Shernoff, 2006).

Experts agree that the form of sexual intercourse which carries the greatest risk of transmitting HIV is unprotected anal intercourse, now known as *barebacking* (Shernoff, 2006), and the rise of this practice has been discussed in the lay press and within gay/bisexual communities for nearly a decade. The idea of *bareback sex* as a transgressive practice directly and actively opposed to repressive public health campaigns has been expressed by several gay activists (Holmes and Warner, 2005; Shernoff, 2006). In its



defence, porn actor and writer Scott O'Hara publicly expressed the virtues of *bareback sex*. In a 1995 editorial entitled 'Exit the Rubberman' he wrote in *Steam*: 'I am tired of using condoms and I won't' (O'Hara, 1995), and 2 years later at a national conference on Gay/Lesbian Health, Tony Valenzuela (1997) stated: 'The level of erotic charge and intimacy I feel when a man comes inside me is transformational, especially in a climate which so completely disregards its importance'.

We believe that an analysis of the practice of *bareback sex* among MSM has been, not only overlooked, but in some instances has been over-simplified. Some authors argue that it is a sexual practice of self-destructive and damaged individuals (Shernoff, 2006). Savage (1999) suggests that 'for some gay men, danger is a permanent fetish' (p. 62). Others believe, however, that for many people, risk-taking is very appealing (Le Breton, 2000), and that *bareback sex* is only one of the practices in the realm of *edgework* activities (Lyng, 2005). The judgmental culture that reduces *bareback sex* to a deviance or perversion unthinkingly assumes that *barebackers* do not 'really' want to be safe, and are actively inviting diseases.

Previous research (Holmes and Warner, 2005) demonstrates quite clearly that what *barebackers* desire is not quite so self-evident. Many of them desire something more than sex with other men, and it is this desire for something more that foils their attempts to practice 'safe sex'. The attainment of this 'something more' has proven impossible within the parameters of what the public health establishment has defined as safe sex. Although we do not claim to have identified the truth underlying *barebackers'* desire, the results of a pilot research project (Holmes and Warner, 2005) did identify some interesting and intriguing themes regarding what penetration and semen exchange meant to some of the participants. It was found that individuals often engage in *bareback sex* for specific reasons such as: connectedness, the abandonment of responsibilities, feelings of completion regarding sexual intercourse, and finally, the naturalness of the sex act (Holmes and Warner, 2005). Moreover, research conducted by Crossley (2002) clearly demonstrates that expressing freedom, rebellion, or empowerment may figure significantly in a predisposition toward *barebacking*.

In this paper, we would like to further our analysis by looking at *bareback sex* as an *edgework* practice or a *limit experience*. To achieve this objective, we will regard *bareback sex* as one of many high-risk practices (including dangerous sports) because this whole range of activities share the common attraction of exploring the limits of human experience in the search for *new possibilities of being*.



## DEFINING LIMIT EXPERIENCE

One might ask why anyone would risk their lives or jeopardize their health if there are no material rewards for doing so? The answer is that people are driven to extremes by the intensity of the experience itself (Lyng, 2005). Embracing the abyss, without falling into it, is an exercise that is enticing more and more devotees. The *limit experience* is an experience of the edge, of the margin, an experience that is actively involved in the *becoming process* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). These edges or margins could be defined in numerous ways: the boundary separating life from death and the line dividing pleasure from pain are examples. *Limit experience* or edgework practices (Lyng, 2005) are often located in the uncivilized spaces where actors 'resist the imperatives of emotional control, rational calculation, *routinization*, and reason in Modern society' (Lyng, 2005, p.6).

Emile Durkheim's work on the nature of transgressive practices/deviance sheds light on these so-called 'irrational' activities. He stated that 'deviant practices' could be understood as the 'inevitable flip-side of a rationalized... culture, one that produces by its own structural logic radical extremes of wealth and poverty, power and powerlessness – and the emotional contradiction of arrogance and humiliation that accompanies these extremes' (Lyng, 2005, p. 7). Foucault, on the other hand, purports that the very process of crossing over, of transgressing limits, is the condition of becoming oneself, a *passage obligé* in the complex process of self-creation, that is, in the production of one's own subjectivity. Because of their complicity in their own oppression and domination by various state structures and their affiliated agencies, which employ a vast array of sovereign, disciplinary, and pastoral techniques, individuals must find extra-marginal avenues of resistance to this panoptic *dispositif* (apparatus) to achieve *de-subjectification*. *Limit experiences* provide a way of putting this resistance into concrete practice. Only in French could we find a complete definition of *limit experience*. In *Dits et Écrits* (vol 4), Foucault (1994, p. 43) clearly defines it as:

Essayer de parvenir à un certain point de la vie qui soit le plus près possible de l'invivable. Ce qui est requis c'est le maximum d'intensité. L'idée d'une expérience limite... a pour fonction d'arracher le sujet à lui-même, de faire en sorte qu'il ne soit plus lui-même ou qu'il soit porté à son anéantissement ou à sa dissolution. C'est une entreprise de *dé-subjectivation*.

Trying to reach a certain point in living that will be as close as possible to the unbearable. This is necessary to achieve the maximum intensity [of existence]. The idea of a limit experience functions to uproot the individual from himself, [to position him] where he is no longer himself, and where he



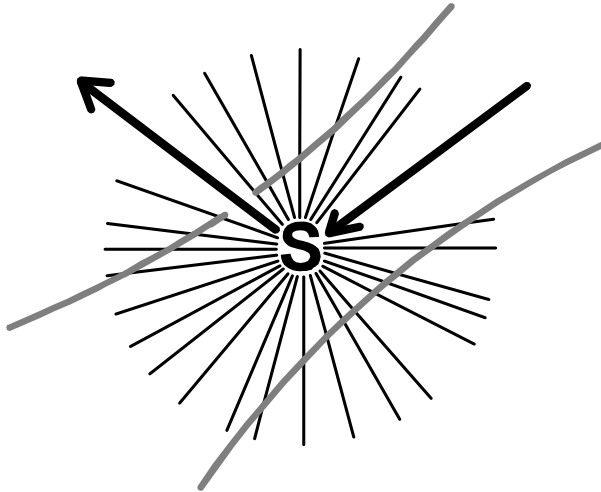
will be carried to his own annihilation or dissolution. This is an activity/work of de-subjectification. (Authors' Translation)

Foucault's analysis of the *limit experience* is based on a broader theorizing of the subject and of the practice of *de-subjectification*. As such, he conceives of the *limit experience* as the fundamental condition of possibility for the emergence of the subject and subjectivity. *Limit experience* is not only a location or a state of mind, but also an objective to discover new possibilities of embodied existence (Lyng, 2005). Foucault once asserted that a disciplinary society is not synonymous with a disciplined one, and therefore, it leaves open the potential for resistance. Because bodies (individual and collective) are not passively disciplined and cannot be completely *mapped* (territorialized, inscribed) by disciplinary technologies, transgressing the prescribed limits 'brings out corporeal potentials that have remained unrealised' (or silenced) by these technologies of power (Lyng, 2005, p. 43).

With *limit experiences*, the body must push boundaries; it must transgress or transfer to a state in which the previous state of existence can no longer continue. By the term *limit*, Foucault did not signify the end, the outside, or the furthest that one can go. Rather, he saw it as a process for reaching beyond this limit, a method of 'pushing the limits'. He once added: 'I think the kind of pleasure I would consider the real [absolute] pleasure would be so deep, so overwhelming that I could not survive it' (Foucault, 1996, p. 378). In the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1980), *limit experience* translates into *becoming*: it is the attachment of oneself to a line of flight (a path for resistance). As can be seen in Figure 1, the subject veers off its original, conventional (constraining) course and crashes through the walls of restraint to *become* something new: that which defined and confined the original subjectivity has been pushed to an extreme and thus beyond it. In the *limit experience*, subjectivity is pushed to the point of death, which might be either real or metaphorical (Tobias, 2005). Simply put, the *limit experience* is reached when the subject is torn from itself (Foucault, 1994).

Foucault maintained that sadomasochistic (S&M) practices embody the *limit experience*. S&M practices are an attempt to break down the boundaries that contain the body through the use of non-conventional methods, which transform the traditional definition of an act (in this case, the sex act) into something new, that is, sex as pain. When viewed from this perspective, *bareback sex* is yet another example of this *limit experience*. In the latter case, sex becomes danger or death. The body is pushed to a new limit where it is forced to re-define itself; it is the *limit experience* that forces the redefinition of the Self (*de-subjectification*), but it does not create this new definition.





**Figure 1:** Line of flight

The first step in delineating the *limit experience* is to examine some of the elements of stratification, such as disciplinary technologies/normalization processes, that force the body to conform to a given set of norms. In a human being, the body and soul (mind, spirit, or self awareness) limit one another in a dynamic, interactive process. It is the soul, which is continually modified and stratified by and through social norms, that prevents the body from satiating its desires and it is the body through its ability or inability to act in a chosen way, which limits the soul to the range of experiences that it can enjoy. The soul imprisons the body and the body is the prison of the soul (Walker, 1994). The soul acts as an internal regulator (the conscience) to limit the *limit experience*, while simultaneously the body limits the soul: the soul that wishes to ‘take flight’ cannot because it is constrained within the physical parameters of the body. In the realm of sexuality, the soul may wish to engage in sexual escapades which the body is incapable of enduring or delivering, while the body may wish to engage in sexual practices that the soul limits because it has been conditioned to consider them socially inappropriate.

Therefore, an essential aspect of the *limit experience* is that one of these two components must be deactivated, either temporarily (through pain, injury, or terror) or permanently (by death) in order for a proscribed barrier to be overcome. However, the pain need not be physical to achieve this end. Foucault explored the *limit experience* through sexual experience, but the pushing of one’s body beyond everyday experience by such means as sleep deprivation, drug trips, law breaking, skydiving, car theft, bungee jumping,



or the self-torture often inflicted during the Sundance Ceremony may all produce a *limit experience*. Such activities create an immanent sense of danger that pushes both the body and the soul into testing their limits. After the experience is completed, the body and soul have been changed: whether it is that the 'high' of the experience creates a wish to recapture it, as in addiction, (Chasing the Dragon), or that the body becomes physically restrained through mutilation or imprisonment, or that the soul desires more change or learns to push itself further.

In Figure 1, the subject becomes something new through the process of *de-subjectification*. The *limit experience* is attained, but simultaneously left behind; the line that veers from subjectivity and crashes through the walls of appropriate behaviour *de-stratifies* itself and may become the new line for the subject. However, the *limit experience*, as a practice of freedom, is not predictable, not scientifically measurable. Therefore, it is an art form – the *Ars Erotica* of experience, which allows and requires learning to be experiential, thus enabling the creation of alternative or 'extreme' sexual practices. Freedom requires an active experiential approach that resists the disciplinary technologies that try to normalize us. In this way, an activity such as *bareback sex* becomes a means of pushing sexuality to the limit. Along with S&M practices, *bareback sex* is considered by many as an example of an 'extreme sexual practice' that defies the disciplinary aspect of public health discourse, and as such, constitutes a blatant indicator of conflict between public health imperatives and the practice of freedom in a post-modern era characterized by allegory, confusion, and chaos. When viewed from this perspective, *barebacking*, as practiced by individuals who need to define themselves beyond the dictates of society, represents a 'way in' for developing ethics and subjectivity appropriate to a non-disciplinary society.

To explore limits (edges or margins) in such a way is to create an 'ethics of the Self': a project of self-creation that enables individuals to explore and identify new possibilities of being and doing (Lyng, 2005). True, *limit experience* has to do with resisting social mores and constraints (see Crossley, 2002), but it also implies the practice of subjectification and identity. Therefore, the criss-crossing of barriers by free subjects is the essence of the *limit experience* that permits, in return, self-actualization (Foucault, 1994). The principal focus of *limit experience* is self-creation by playing with the lines that separate the concepts of normality and deviance, that is, licit and illicit sexual practices. Foucault asserted that for transgression to be effective, one must play with limits without overcoming them. As such, transgression is implicated in the creation of the Self because it allows the individual to cross a line and come back to the normative space freely.



According to Lyng (2005), playing with boundaries and transgressing them at times may be the sole remaining form of resistance available, one of the few independent human possibilities left in a disciplinary society where regulations and the reification of normative behaviours is pervasive. Foucault provided a sophisticated theoretical understanding of resistance with which to explore the practice of *bareback sex* as a practical accomplishment, undertaken as part of a politico-ethical agenda that incorporates limit experience as its principal methodological tool (Lyng, 2005).

### **BAREBACK SEX AND THE POLITICS/ETHICS OF THE SELF**

Although we can assume that, due to the fear of possible contamination and pollution it evokes, *barebacking* constitutes, for society at large, an irrational sexual practice, we might also consider *barebacking* as an act of courage associated with the ethics of the Self rather than as an act of insanity or despair. This section attempts, by applying a Foucauldian perspective, to discuss *practices of freedom* and the *ethics of the Self*, two concepts that at the outset appear to be divergent. To do so, we need first take a Nietzschean position, that is, we need to free ourselves from personal constraints (beliefs, etc.) by disassociating ourselves from our societal conditioning: to operate '*un travail de déprise*' (Gros, 2002, p. 27). We need to cross the boundary, which actually centres us within our own subjectivity before we can attempt to understand the *Other*, which constitutes a new, unexplored, and perhaps alien territory.

Earlier we examined the link between *limit experience* and the creation of new subjectivities whereby the individual (re)defines the Self by transgressing accepted social norms. This implies work on the Self, and for that to occur, one must employ what Foucault called practices of the Self (Gros, 2002). These practices of the Self constitute the essence of a moral work on oneself in order to transform previous behaviours into new ones. This ethical process is easily recognizable in the experience of sexual practices because, according to Foucault, they constitute the privileged experience of a culture of the Self (Bernauer and Rasmussen, 1994; Gros, 2002). 'Subjectification' occurs herein: a work on oneself by the Self.

In his two last publications on the History of sexuality, Foucault (1984a, b) demonstrated how the aesthetics of existence was the main route by which individuals create themselves (Foucault, 1984a, b; Gros, 2002). The governance of the individualized pleasures of the flesh (*aphrodisia*) was an important dimension in the construction of the ethics of the Self. The historical work of Foucault regarding sexuality allows for an elaboration of



contemporary ethics of the Self by recognizing the importance of renewed Self practices, including sexual ones.

Historically, from an ethical standpoint, the Greek culture of the Self was characterized by a multiplicity of choices and norms. The very expression of these ethical choices is political (Gros, 2002). Greek ethical culture acknowledged a plurality of sexual possibilities without advocating a particular one. Foucault's work on the History of sexuality provides a path from which to theorize power in such a way that it is produced out of one's own practices. One needs to understand power through the process of *becoming*, starting with the locus from which it emerges, the individual's practices. Whether they are considered compliant or non-compliant (deviant), individuals allow power to manifest itself through their sexual practices because personal ethics are intimately related to politics. The term self-ethics relates to the governance of one's conduct or practices. In other words, self-defined ethical standards, although they differ from one individual to the next, allow for the governance of the Self. It is thus possible to link transgressive behaviours (like *bareback sex*) to an ethics of the Self based on practices of freedom (*pratiques de liberté*) as proposed by the Greeks.

*Barebackers* manifest the 'courage' of their ethical standards as beings. At first glance, this statement may seem subversive or irresponsible, but understood within a Foucauldian perspective it resonates powerfully. The correlation between what one is and thinks, and what one does or says within an everyday context provides an unmistakable example of *parrhèsia*. According to Foucault (2001, p. 19), *parrhèsia* is

A kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty.

Being able to acknowledge one's involvement in unsafe anal sex could be perceived as either completely provocative, or as very courageous. In fact, this dynamic correlation between truth-telling and one's own sexual practices characterizes Foucault's cynical *parrhèsia*st, as it spotlights the subversive nature of the *barebackers*' ethics and existence. For Baudelaire and Flaubert, this cynical attitude constitutes an aggressive response to imposed social norms. According to Foucault, the coupling of truth telling and real life sexual practices is provocative since real life is almost always scandalous (Gros, 2002).

Because they are political in describing their 'real life', the *barebackers*' narratives (in the sexual health clinics for instance) could be linked to cynical



*parrhèsia*. By exposing their practices to a (public) health care provider's scrutiny, they allow an alternative truth that is linked to human existence to become known. For Foucault, these affirmations (narratives) are examples of the transgression of commonly accepted social norms and values. The cynical *parrhèsiast's* life is a true one, because it stretches the truth about human existence to an extreme, almost intolerable, limit. The cynical *parrhèsiast's* ethics expose the individual's personal truth to society by challenging socially acceptable norms.

Perhaps, as Foucault pointed out, there exist two distinct forms of truth: one that is pleasant, ordered, harmonious, and associated with the courage of an unrelentingly slow transformation of the Self; the other that is fractured, discontinuous, scandalous, dirty, sad, intense, and provocatively intent on completely exposing the truth of reality, even the most scandalous one (Gros, 2002). In which case, *barebackers* could be portrayed as cynical *parrhèsiasts* who transgress the normative discourse of safe sex in their quest for a new subjectivity, one characterized by freedom through unlimited pleasure. Outside the boundaries of clinical walls, *barebackers* are engaged 'with the project of the Self' within which their sexual careers and praxes are firmly ingrained. *Barebackers* are engaged in 'transgressive' sexual practices and are, therefore, inherently invested in the development of sexual aesthetics, and performances.

## FINAL REMARKS

Foucault has contributed significantly to an understanding of sexuality. In fact, his theoretical concepts of *Ars Erotica* (the possibility of enjoying sexual pleasures not dominated or dictated by an extrinsic law, a template of 'ethical subjectivity') and *Scientia Sexualis* (the deployment of sexual experts and the spread of confession techniques) constitute two signifiers of powerful discursive tensions between (public) health care providers and sexual conduct (Pryce, 2000). These two theoretical 'practicalities' enable an effective analysis of sexual practices and subjectivities in a wider discursive arena of power/knowledge regarding the *sexual* to take place. As Petersen and Bunton (1997) declared, the contribution and influence of Foucault has been phenomenal and has greatly invigorated theoretical developments in the study of health care disciplines of power/knowledge. Similarly, the analysis of the social construction of sexualities has been far reaching when using a Foucauldian lens (Pryce, 2000).

*Limit experience* provides a rush, a moment of experiential anarchy and a sense of experiential resistance to legal and economic authority – a moment



of self-liberation accomplished 'through the magical, on the spot conversion of one's own criminalization and *ostracization* into an enhanced experience of euphoric excitement' (Lyng, 2005, p. 84). *Limit experience* is therefore an adventure, a *chassé-croisé* (an intricate criss-crossing dance) between the margins of the norm and those of excess and (self) intoxication. Not only is it an accomplishment of the Self (through self-creation and perhaps self-destruction) but also a political manoeuvre to subvert the omnipresent hierarchies that govern everyday life. Thus, *limit experiences* are part of an ethical and a political process capable, according to Foucault, of accounting for a sensual uprising against the platitudes of disciplinary societies. Could it be possible, then, to perceive of *barebackers* as human beings desperate to live a life outside the violence of order, and determined to live fully (although excessively)? Through the *limit experience* of unsafe anal sex with anonymous partners of unknown (HIV) serological status, *barebackers* are engaged in a revolution against the constraints of everyday life.

We believe this revolution is nurtured by repressive public health *dispositifs* (apparatuses) and reinforced by media campaigns, which demonize targeted subgroups of the population. *Barebackers'* practices are subjected to the normative regulation of the rational-medical (public health) discourse, within which they are constructed as deviant and dangerous while at the same time these individuals are surrounded by the temptations of consumer capitalism to break free and indulge excess and states of intoxication. *Barebackers'* experimental works of creation are parallel to the work carried out by Foucault's sadomasochist who refuses to let the limits of normalized sex define his sexuality. This is the work of taking an active role in creating one's freedom, in continuing to live one's own life, and in experiencing and giving pleasure even when the 'truths' and modes of behaviour that provide a measure of comfort to the multitude provide *barebackers* with none.

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